



University of Southern Maine  
**USM Digital Commons**

---

Faculty Publications

Philosophy

---

2002

## A Fugitive Thread: The Production of Subjectivity in Marx

Jason Read PhD

*University of Southern Maine*, [Jason.Read@maine.edu](mailto:Jason.Read@maine.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/philosophy-faculty>

---

### Recommended Citation

Read, J. (2002). A Fugitive Thread: The Production of Subjectivity in Marx. *Pli: The Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, 13, 126-144.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu](mailto:jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu).

## **A Fugitive Thread: The Production of Subjectivity in Marx**

JASON READ

---

If one has the audacity to attempt an analysis of the current conjuncture, an analysis that is not satisfied to simply circulate the watchwords of “postmodernism” and “globalization,” but attempts to locate the real contradictions and tensions animating the present, then such an analysis must start from the intimate relationship between capitalism and subjectivity. Intimate, in the sense that subjectivity and the production of subjectivity are no longer (if they ever were) limited to the superstructure, to the reproduction of a capable and docile labor force, they have become directly productive for capital. This can be seen in the way in which knowledge, affects, and tastes have become incorporated into the production process. In contemporary capitalism (it is difficult today to retain the appellation “late capitalism”) it is not just commodities that are produced and consumed but “lifestyles” ways of perceiving, thinking, and acting. It is this new reality that critical thinking must confront and transform. At first glance it would appear that the existing theoretical tools seem inadequate to the task. On one side, stemming from Marx, there are the tools for an examination of the transformations and development of the capitalist mode of production in which subjectivity remains an afterthought or consequence, while on another side, stemming from Foucault and poststructuralist thinkers, there is an examination of the production of subjectivity as a “relation to self” which is examined apart from the transformation of capitalist valorization (Lazzarato 115). In the current conjuncture we find ourselves stranded between these two lines of investigation unable to grasp the transformations of politics, culture, and the economy by new intersections of production and the production of subjectivity.

One response to this theoretical impasse would be to seek the possible grounds for an intersection of these two theoretical fields. There is emerging work in this area that seeks the possible point of articulation between the examination of the capitalist mode of production in Marx and the analysis of the production of subjectivity in Foucault and after. However, the search for such a relation would on some level presuppose what I would like to put into question here. It assumes that each discourse contains what the other lacks, that there may not already be an investigation of the production of subjectivity in Marx, and thus the two modes of investigation can be assembled together like pieces of a puzzle. Rather than attempt to reconcile Marx's analysis of the mode of production with the production of subjectivity as if they were necessarily two separate unified problems I would like to examine the manner in which there is already a theory of the production of subjectivity in Marx. Marx does not explicitly develop this theory, rather it exists in the interstices and the points of tension and contact of his concepts. Thus such an examination entails reading Marx "against the grain." Perhaps less against the grain of Marx, but rather of much work on Marxism which finds in the early works an appeal to a humanist conception of subjectivity (necessarily pre-existing its later alienation in an original fullness) and in the later encounters nothing but a purely economic exposition of the laws of capitalist development.

A reading for the production of subjectivity in Marx entails an investigation of not only Marx's concept of the mode of production but the implicit ontology that underlying it, appearing intermittently as a sort of "fugitive thread" in Marx's writings. Perhaps the clearest indication of this ontology is given in the 1857 'Introduction', otherwise known as Notebook M of the *Grundrisse*. The immediate critical target of Marx's introduction is the categories of classical political economy, specifically, how bourgeois or classical political economy proceeds from a particular articulation of the relation between production, distribution, exchange, and consumption. Marx writes:

Thus [in political economy] production, distribution, exchange and consumption form a regular syllogism; production is the generality, distribution and exchange the particularity [*Besonderheit*], and consumption the singularity [*Einzelheit*] in which the whole is joined together. This is admittedly a coherence, but a shallow one. Production is determined by general natural laws, distribution by social accident, and the latter may therefore

promote production to a greater or lesser extent; exchange stands between the two as a formal social movement; and the concluding act, consumption, which is conceived not only as a terminal point [*Endziel*] but also as an end-in-itself [*Endzweck*], actually belongs outside of economics except in so far as it reacts in turn upon the point of departure and initiates the whole process anew. (1973 89/25)

Within this conception of political economy, production and consumption, the starting point and end point of political economy, are outside political economy, or, at least, outside the history of political economy. Consumption and production are governed by “natural laws”, by the anthropological constants of need and reproduction. They thus function as the “given”, the assumed ground from which political economy proceeds. Only distribution and circulation are recognized as properly historical: there are only different types of property, different forms of law, which mediate without changing the natural relation of need. The only relation is exchange. The only history is the history of different forms of exchange. Classical political economy is determined in the first and last instance by an anthropology that is wise enough to remain out of sight, directing the action from off stage.<sup>196</sup> As Louis Althusser has argued it is not a big step from this silent anthropological ground to an entire anthropomorphic discourse on the social in which “society” or the “economy” is figured as a closed totality with needs and demands. Classical political economy begins from an implicit conception of subjectivity, a static anthropology of need and exchange, and from this presupposition it articulates an image of society as a unified subject. Marx’s opposition to this second point is well known, where classical political economy sees a unified society, a population, Marx finds the differences and antagonisms of class struggle. What is less apparent is that Marx also opposed the implicit ground of classical political economy, developing an anthropology that does not tie subjectivity to ahistorical coordinates of need and scarcity, but posits subjectivity as both produced and productive.

---

<sup>196</sup> Althusser argues that this “anthropology” remains out of sight in and through the manner in which classical economy assumes “need” as a necessarily pre-conceptual given which delineates the field of political economy, political economy is concerned with material need. Thus this anthropology is at the same time a moral ideology – what it excludes by definition is the determination of the economy by other factors such as power or domination. There is by definition only production for need. (Althusser and Balibar 162/368)

For Marx the terms of classical political economy, production, consumption, and distribution, and the relations these terms describe must be understood as historical. Or, put differently, rather than maintaining the simple and linear causality of natural needs and historical mediations, Marx develops a thought of the complex relations of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption in which all act upon and determine each other, and to a certain extent, produce each other. To translate this into another philosophical language, the interrelations of production, consumption, and distribution could be considered as the exposition of a thought of immanence, in that it is opposed to both the theoretical assertion of a transcendental scene of determination that remains exterior to that which it determines (as in most forms of economism) or the assumption of a concealed transcendental foundation (as in the anthropological ground of classical economics).<sup>197</sup> A thought of immanence requires that all of the relations (production, distribution, and consumption) must be thought both as effect and cause of each other. The simultaneity of a relation of cause and effect can be demonstrated with respect to production and consumption. Marx demonstrates that production and consumption seem to have an immediate identity as well as a contrariety, in the simple fact that all production involves consumption of raw materials and at the same time all consumption seems to immediately produce something, if only the energy for production. Beyond this immediate identity Marx asserts that there is a more intimate relation of co-implication that encompasses and enfolds the supposed exterior and ahistorical ground of need and subjectivity.

Production not only supplies a material for the need, but it also supplies a need for the material. As soon as consumption emerges from its initial state of natural crudity and immediacy – and, if it

---

<sup>197</sup>Althusser argues that Marx's entire mature philosophy entails a rethinking of causality, and the development of a thought of "immanent causality", which breaks down the rigid hierarchy between cause and effect. The supposed "effects" of the capitalist mode of production, such as greed and ideologies of possession and property, must be equally thought as causes, elements of its functioning. "This implies therefore that the effects are not outside the structure, are not a pre-existing object, element or space in which the structure arrives to *imprint its mark*: on the contrary, it implies that the structure is immanent in its effects, a cause immanent in its effects in the Spinozist sense of the term, that *the whole existence of the structure consists of its effects*, in short that the structure, which is merely a specific combination of its peculiar elements, is nothing outside its effects" (Althusser and Balibar 191/405).

remained at that stage, this would be because production itself had been arrested there – it becomes itself mediated as a drive by the object. The need which consumption feels for the object is created by the perception of it. The object of art – like every other product – creates a public which is sensitive to art and enjoys beauty. Production thus not only creates an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object ... Consumption likewise produces the producers *inclination* by beckoning to him as an aim determining need (“Grundrisse” 92/27).

Production produces consumption, producing not only its object but its particular mode and subject, and in turn consumption acts on production, in effect producing it.<sup>198</sup> Similarly, Marx explains: “consumption ideally posits the object of production as an internal image, as a need, as a drive and a purpose. It creates the objects of production in a still subjective form” (1973 92/27).

The mutual relations of causality between production, consumption, and distribution, are supported by another larger sense of production, which is no longer simply economic production, but is the assertion that these different practices cannot but have effects on one another, effects that exceed anything that can be measured on the level of the economy. According to Marx: “Production predominates not only over itself, in the antithetical definition of production, but over the other moments as well....A definite [*bestimmte*] production thus determines a definite consumption, distribution and exchange as well as *definite relations between these different moments*. Admittedly, however, in its *one sided form*, production is itself determined by the other moments” (1973 99/34). This relation between a determinant production, consumption, and distribution, serves as one definition given by Marx of a “mode of production”; it does not posit subjectivity as an external element to be “fooled” or interpellated by ideology, but recognizes it as an immanent and constitutive dimension of the mode of production. For Marx it is the recognition of the implication of subjectivity in the mode of production, its historical status as something both produced and productive of the mode of production, which in part differentiates the critical materialist account of the economy from classical economics. “The production of capitalists and wage laborers is thus a chief product of capital’s

---

<sup>198</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari cite, albeit obliquely, Marx’s introduction in developing their account of the immanent relation of subjectivity, specifically desire, to the mode of production (1983 4/10)

realization process. Ordinary economics, which looks only at the things produced, forgets this completely". (1973 512) Production is always the production of subjects as much as it is the production of objects.

If one wanted to think in terms of "breaks" then it would be possible to say that Marx breaks with what would later become the two major spectres of Marxist thought, "economism" and "humanism" with one term – production. As Marx wrote in the sixth of the *Theses on Feuerbach*: "...the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations". While this statement has been interpreted as constituting a break with humanism, replacing the assertion of an abstract essence with the historicity of social relations, it could also be interpreted as an indicator pointing towards Marx's ontological conception of production. Production is not an activity restricted to the realm of the economy, nor is it simply an anthropological necessity, it is affirmation that existence is relational, there are not abstract essences only the multiple effects, the changing ensembles, of different practices. Production is immanence. It is not only the assertion that there is no other world than this one, but the recognition that this world is constantly being made and remade from a multiplicity of different relations. An immanent conception of production cannot differentiate in advance between the production of things and the production of subjectivity, ascribing to each an *a priori* role as determining and determined, but must be open to their different historical articulations.

In the Introduction Marx seems oddly contemporary, seeming to take into account not only the philosophical problem of the production of subjectivity, but the related social and political problem of the creation of needs and desires through consumption and marketing. As with many points in the *Grundrisse*, the reader is struck by the almost prophetic nature of Marx's writing. It remains difficult, however, to relate Marx's insistence on immanence in the introduction with his other mature writings, which seem to focus on a more limited sense of production, the production of things, at the expense of the more thorough account of production that includes the production of social relations. Despite the fact that Marx did not publish the "1857 Introduction" because it seemed to anticipate his research, with respect to the problem of the production of subjectivity. The "Introduction" stands as more of a provocation for future inquiry, than a result.<sup>199</sup> The question then becomes a search for

---

<sup>199</sup> Marx's stated reasons for not publishing the introduction were as follows: "A general introduction, which I had drafted, is omitted, since on further consideration it

elements of this thought of immanence, or the materiality of subjectivity, in Marx's other writings.

The immanent relation between production and the production of subjectivity announces itself most forcefully at the points in Marx's writing where he deals with the problem of the transition from one mode of production to another. At these points of historical transformation, where one mode of production is destroyed and another is constituted, Marx underscores that such a transformation is impossible without a corresponding transformation of subjectivity. This can be seen in the chapters of *Capital* where Marx discusses the origin and the formation of the capitalist mode of production. The search for the origins of capitalist accumulation seems to lead to an infinite regress, always presupposing its two constitutive conditions: wealth freed from its investment in any particular endeavor, or capital, and individuals with only their labor power to sell, or workers. In order to accumulate capital it is necessary to possess capital. There must then be an original or primitive accumulation, an accumulation which is not the result of the capitalist mode of production but rather its precondition, and which separates the workers from the conditions of employment and stockpiles wealth. Marx's theory of primitive accumulation is an argument which is both historically and theoretically dense – dealing with both the history of capitalism in Europe and the relation between violence, law, and the economy. For our purposes we can isolate three moments of primitive accumulation: first, expropriation, the destruction of the commonly held lands, second, bloody legislation, laws which punish and control the disappropriated peasantry, and third, a period of normalization in which the previous moment of violence is eclipsed in the “naturalization” of a new mode of production.<sup>200</sup> At each point in the process the economic transformation is

seems to me confusing to anticipate results which still have to be substantiated, and the reader who really wishes to follow me will have to decide to advance from the particular to the general.” (1970 13)

<sup>200</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have related Marx's theory to a particular type of violence which is difficult to critique because it is always presented as pre-accomplished and carrying its justification. Deleuze and Guattari write: “Hence the very particular character of state violence: it is very difficult to pinpoint this violence because it always presents itself as pre-accomplished. It is not even adequate to say that the violence rests with the mode of production. Marx made the observation in the case of capitalism: there is a violence that necessarily operates through the state, precedes the capitalist mode of production, constitutes the “primitive accumulation” and makes possible the capitalist mode of production itself. From a standpoint within the capitalist mode of production, it is very difficult to say who is the thief and who is the victim, or even where the violence resides. That is because the worker is born



caused by and effects a transformation of social relations and subjectivity.<sup>201</sup> What is destroyed in primitive accumulation is not simply possessions or relations to the land but a social relation and form of cooperation. It is with respect to the final moment, normalization, that subjectivity fully comes into play. In order for the capitalist mode of production to constitute itself as a social order it must inscribe itself in the habits, desires, and fears of the newly formed working class (Albiac 13). As Marx writes: “The advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education [*Erziehung*], tradition, and habit [*Gewohnheit*] looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as self evident natural laws” (1977 899/765).

The peasants, farmers, and small craftsmen that are cast out from their conditions of existence are not already workers, subjects of labor-power. In fact, Marx reminds us that historically they were more likely to resort to theft and vagabondage (1973 736). This is why it is insufficient to simply separate the peasants and artisans from the means of production. In order for them to become workers, bearers of a force and power that is exchangeable and calculable, an entire series of apparatuses must be put to work, educating, training, and breeding a man that can be made productive. Along with the accumulation of wealth and the breakdown of feudal or guild relations there is a necessary subjective dimension of the constitution of the capitalist mode of production – it requires a subject not only trained to the rhythms of the capitalist mode of production but whose desires and needs are also attuned to its particular regime of accumulation.<sup>202</sup> To juxtapose Marx’s chapter on primitive accumulation,

---

entirely naked and the capitalist objectively “clothed” an independent owner. That which gave the worker and the capitalist this form eludes us because it operated in other modes of production. (1987, 447/558)

<sup>201</sup>It is important to note that we are not dealing with a process in any linear and teleological sense, primitive accumulation is a series of events that have fundamentally different motivations and effects, they can only be pieced together in a narrative retroactively. For example: the laws that destroyed the commons did not have as their intention the creation of an urban proletariat, this was simply an unintended effect that was later seized by other agents and actors. Louis Althusser calls this process by which the effects of a particular process are seized and turned to other purpose and other ends *détournement*, or “detouring”: “This “detouring” is the mark of the non-teleology of the process and the inscription of its result in a process which has rendered it possible and which was totally alien to it.” (Althusser 1994 572, my transl.)

<sup>202</sup> Marx asserts that the condition of these new desires and necessities on the part of the worker is the money form, or a particular aspect of the money form the wage: “It is the worker himself who converts the money into whatever use-values he desires; it

which ends the first volume of *Capital*, with Marx's writing on the commodity, which opens it, we see that the former puts into question what the latter seems to presuppose: the commodification of labor.<sup>203</sup> Labor power does not always already exist, ready to be commodified, rather its exploitation entails the destruction and creation of a form of social cooperation and subjectivity.

Marx's notebook "Pre-capitalist Economic Formations" in the *Grundrisse* offer something of a general, albeit abstract and at times vague, theoretical schema of the interrelation of the mode of production and the production of subjectivity. Marx presents the immanence of the production of subjectivity to the mode of production through a genealogy of the capitalist mode of production. Here, as with primitive accumulation, Marx is primarily concerned with the formation of the two constitutive elements of the capitalist mode of production, a flow of wealth and a flow of individuals who have only their labor power to sell, and it is the latter of these two elements which is the central concern. However, "Pre-capitalist Economic Formations" crosses the same terrain as primitive accumulation with one important difference: while the latter gives only a negative definition of the bonds which make up pre-capitalist sociality by presenting the violence necessary to destroy them, the former attempts to present a positive definition of pre-capitalist sociality. It does so within a general discussion of the "mode of production," thus reading this notebook one is confronted with both a profound difference (an

---

is he who buys commodities as he wishes and, as the *owner of money*, as the buyer of goods, he stands in precisely the same relationship to the seller of goods as any other buyer. Of course, the conditions his existence--and the limited amount of money he can earn--compel him to make his purchases from a fairly restricted section of goods. But some variation is possible as we can see from the fact that newspapers, for example, form part of the essential purchases of the urban English worker. He can save or hoard a little. Or else he can squander his money on drink. But even so he acts as a free agent; he must pay his own way; he is responsible to himself for the he spends his wages." (1977 1033/103)

<sup>203</sup>As Althusser writes: "When you read Section 1 Book 1 of *Capital*, you find a theoretical presentation of surplus value: it is an arithmetical presentation, in which surplus value is calculable, defined by a difference (in value) between the value produced by labor power on the one hand and the value of the commodities necessary for the reproduction of this labor power (wages) on the other. And in this arithmetical presentation of surplus value, labor figures purely and simply as a commodity. (1979 233) As Althusser argues in a different text this purely quantitative and abstract presentation of exploitation misses the concrete power and social relations necessary to the extraction of value, struggle proceeds from these relations. (1994 398)

epochal divide separating pre-capitalist modes of production from capitalism) and a kernel of a general theory.<sup>204</sup>

For Marx the specifically pre-capitalist modes of production (Asiatic, Ancient, and Feudal) are necessarily conservative in that they have as their specific goal the reproduction of a particular form of property and a particular social relation. Reproduction of a social relation is also reproduction of a particular form of subjectivity. What characterizes the different pre-capitalist modes of production is not just their intrinsically conservative nature, but the fact that subjectivity is inseparable from its collective and inorganic conditions. The subject is not exposed to whatever existence he or she can get exchange in his or her labor power but is embedded in cultural, technical and political conditions that he or she works to reproduce. In the various pre-capitalist modes of production these conditions are “naturalized”: that is, they appear to be given, to be the preconditions and not the results of labor. Marx compares this relation to these conditions to the relation to the earth, as the divinely given condition of existence and labor, they constitute the “inorganic body” of labor, an intimate exteriority, outside of the subject but necessary to it.<sup>205</sup> Marx is not simply content, however, to wax nostalgically about some sort of “primitive communism.” It is not just the earth or the tribe that appears to be the precondition of one’s existence but also the Asiatic despot.<sup>206</sup> In the Asiatic mode of production the despot appears to be the

---

<sup>204</sup> Antonio Negri suggests that Marx’s use of the term “mode of production” encompasses both a world historical sense, the passage from the Asiatic to the capitalist mode of production, developed most strongly in the notebook on pre-capitalist economic formations, and a on smaller scale, the transformation of the technological and social conditions of labor from handicrafts to large scale industry, analyzed in *Capital*. (Negri 151) In “Pre-capitalist Economic Formations” we are clearly dealing with this second larger sense, which is not only “world-historical” but encompasses the relation between what is generally called “base” and “superstructure” tending towards a materialist definition of culture. (Althusser 1995 45)

<sup>205</sup> “These natural conditions of existence, to which he relates as to his own inorganic body, are themselves double: (1) of a subjective and (2) of an objective nature. He finds himself a member of a family, clan, tribe, etc.—which then, in a historic process of intermixture and antithesis with others, takes on a different shape; and as such a member, he relates to a specific nature (say, here, still earth, land, soil) as his own inorganic being, as a condition of his production and reproduction” (Marx 1973 490/398).

<sup>206</sup> As Deleuze and Guattari write: “...the forms of social production, like those of desiring production, involve an unengendered nonproductive attitude, an element of anti-production coupled with the process, a full body that functions as a *socius*. This socius may be the body of the earth, that of the tyrant, or capital. This is the body that

precondition of the community, of its works and existence. Each of the pre-capitalist modes of production is constituted by a fundamental misrecognition, what is produced by the labor of the community appears as its precondition, as an element of divine authority.

This misrecognition might seem to be a particular quality of pre-capitalist societies, or rather a particular quality of Marx's nineteenth century perspective on these societies. However, Marx also posits a fundamental misrecognition at the core of the capitalist mode of production. In capital it appears that capital produces and circulates by itself, seeming to be prior to and autonomous from the collective activities of labor. In short, money appears to beget money. This appearance, this mystification, increases with the development of the capitalist mode of production. The more capitalism puts to work the collective and social powers of labor in the form of science, knowledge, and machinery, the more capital itself appears to be productive. This then constitutes the link between capitalism and ancient despotism. "The power of Asiatic and Egyptian kings, of Etruscan theocrats, etc. has in modern society been transferred to the capitalist, whether he appears as an isolated individual or, as in the case of joint stock companies, in combination with others" (Marx 1977 452/353). Marx is not merely positing a rhetorical or polemical identity between capitalism and ancient despotism, locating ancient tyrannies at the heart of modernity. Rather, Marx is arguing that in both cases there is a social and subjective surplus of labor. It is this surplus that is mystified, appearing to be part of the despot or capital. Whereas in ancient societies this surplus is produced by slavery, in modern society it is produced by the development of the cooperative powers of labor. In each case there is a dimension of labor that exceeds any economic calculation. This excessive dimension is cooperation, collectivity itself, the simple fact that a group of individuals working together will always be capable of more than the sum of its parts. Capital pays for workers one by one but when it puts them to work it puts knowledges, observations, and even rivalries of a collectivity to work.<sup>207</sup>

---

Marx is referring to when he says that it is not the product of labor, but rather appears as its natural or divine presuppositions. In fact, it does not restrict itself merely to opposing productive forces in and of themselves. It falls back on [*il se rabat sur*] all production, constituting a surface over which the forces and agents of production are distributed, thereby appropriating for itself all surplus production and arrogating to itself both the whole and the parts of the process, which now seem to emanate from it as a quasi-cause". (1983 10/16)

<sup>207</sup> Whether the combined working day, in a given case, acquires this increased productivity because it heightens the mechanical force of labor, or extends its sphere

We could say that this incalculable surplus of collectivity constitutes a kind of hyper-exploitation, but that would presuppose a collectivity existing prior to exploitation. In the formation of capital the collective itself is constituted in the act of exploitation.

Marx's notebooks on "Pre-capitalist Economic Formations" provide not so much a schema, but a sketch of the relationship between subjectivity and the mode of production. First, it places subjectivity as entirely immanent to the mode of production, it is as much a part of the mode of production as its technical component. Second, it demonstrates that the relationship between subjectivity and the mode of production necessarily entails a dimension of subjection. Subjection for Marx always stems from a misrecognition of power and activity. In the Asiatic and feudal mode of production (as in capital) something produced and contingent, the despot or the feudal order, appears not to be produced at all but as the necessary condition for all production. In each case it is not simply a matter of a perceptual slippage between the necessary and contingent, or the productive and no productive; first because, as with Marx's famous commodity fetishism, these are not mere appearances but illusions inscribed in the heart of things. More importantly, in each case, the misrecognition relates to the presentation of a collective changing and creative power, which is presented as an attribute of a sovereign subject (despotism) or of things (capitalism).<sup>208</sup> Finally, "Pre-capitalist Economic Formations" lays out the fundamental tensions and contradictions that can cause the transformation from one mode of production to another. These tensions can at the root be described as either the contradiction between an unrepresentable collective sociality and any figure or instance that would appropriate that power, or, following the terminology Marx uses in the

---

of action over a greater space, or contracts the field of production relatively to the scale of production, or at the critical moment sets large masses of labor to work, or excited rivalry between individuals and raises their animal spirits, or impresses on the similar operations carried on by a number of men the stamp of continuity and many-sidedness, or performs different operations simultaneously, or economizes the means of production by use in common...whichever of these is the cause of the increase, the special productive power of the combined working day, is under all circumstances, the social productive power of labor, or the productive power of social labor. This power arises from cooperation itself. When the worker co-operates in a planned way with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of this species [*Gattungsvermögen*]. (Marx 1977 447/349).

<sup>208</sup> As I have already noted Deleuze and Guattari have taken this sketch from Marx the farthest in developing a general theory of subjectivity/mode of production. For Deleuze and Guattari the name of this collective fugitive power is "desiring production" which is strictly speaking unrepresentable.

notebooks, as the contradiction between the reproduction of a mode of production and the productive excess that exceeds that reproduction. This is only a sketch as the actual dynamics and relations have to be thought from the material singularity of a given mode of production.

Despite any similarity between Asiatic despotism and the capitalist mode of production there is a fundamental difference of “the production of subjectivity”. Pre-capitalist modes of production have as their goal the reproduction of a particular form of collective existence with its corresponding hierarchies, structures of belief, and practices. As such they are vulnerable to anything that would break up the codes of subjective existence, they are equally threatened by anything that challenges the subjective conditions for reproduction as the objective conditions. For example, war destabilizes both the economic and subjective conditions of the ancient mode of production redistributing property, honors, and claims for citizenship. Marx’s “Pre-capitalist Economic Formations” presents a genealogy of the capitalist mode of production that is simultaneously a narrative of the generation and corruption of the different forms of subjectivity. Capitalism is fundamentally different in that production is no longer subordinated to the reproduction of systems of belief. As Marx contends, beneath the limited bourgeois form, the subordination of all productive activity to capitalist valorization, capital is nothing other than the unfettered forces of production, including certainly, the production of subjectivity.

Thus the old view, in which the human being appears as the aim of production, regardless of his limited national, religious, political character, seems to me to be lofty when contrasted to the modern world, where production appears as the aim of mankind and wealth as the aim of production. In fact, however, when the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of human needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces etc., created through universal exchange? The full development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as humanity’s own nature? The absolute working out of his creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historical development ... Where [humanity] does not reproduce [her]self in one specificity, but produces her totality? Strives not to remain something [s]he has become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming? In bourgeois economics-and in the epoch of production to which it

corresponds-this complete working-out of the human content appears as a complete emptying out, this universal objectification as total alienation, and the tearing down of all limited, one-sided aims as sacrifice of the human end-in-itself to an entirely external end (Marx 1973 488/396).

Capitalism constitutes and is constituted by a revolution at the level of subjectivity. However, it would be wrong to identify capitalism with a completely deterritorialized flow of production, it must subject this productive activity to the demands of surplus value. "Capitalism can proceed only by developing the subjective essence of abstract wealth or production for the sake of production...but...at the same time it can do so only in the framework of its own limited purpose, as a determinate mode of production...the self expansion of existing capital" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983 259/308). The capitalist mode of production has at its foundation a collective subjectivity unhinged from any determinate coding of subjectivity – it is this collective power that the capitalist mode of production must simultaneously produce and contain.

The doubled edge relationship that the capitalist mode of production has with subjectivity can be found in the genesis of Marx's conceptualization of labor. Mario Tronti has argued that Marx's development of the concept of abstract labor, or of the relation between abstract labor and concrete labor, can be understood as the convergence of problematics inherited in part from political economy, specifically Ricardo, on one side, and Hegel on the other (Tronti 156). From Ricardo, Marx receives the problem of the relationship between value and abstract subjective activity, where value is no longer linked to either a specific object or a determinant type of labor, but to abstract or generic activity.<sup>209</sup> While from Hegel, Marx inherits the problem of "abstract labor," in order for labor to constitute a measure, to be exchanged, it must be standardized

---

<sup>209</sup> This observation is made by Foucault in *The Order of Things* (254). Foucault's argument in this text is to deny that Marx constitutes any sort of break (epistemological or otherwise) with the problems and presuppositions of political economy. In contrast to this argument Deleuze and Guattari turn to the same problem, the connection between subjectivity and value, in order to find in Marx a recognition of the fact that the problem of capital is the problem of subjectivity. As Deleuze and Guattari write: "Marx said that Luther's merit was to have determined the essence of religion, no longer on the side of the object, but as an interior religiosity; that the merit of Adam Smith and Ricardo was to have determined the essence or nature of wealth no longer as an objective nature but as an abstract and deterritorialized subjective essence, the activity of production in general" (1983 270/322).

and rendered equivalent. Whereas for Hegel this standardization was part of the actualization of the universal, a moment of cultural *Bildung*, for Marx it is a necessary moment in the constitution of the capitalist mode of production. The coexistence of these two problems imposes on Marx's thought a demand which is alien to Ricardo and Hegel: the demand to consider the coexistence of an abstract subjective force (labor-power) that is extremely powerful, productive of the realm of value, and the necessary discipline and control of that force (capital). This combination of Ricardo and Hegel in Marx can be understood to entail the same political problem that for Foucault underlies disciplinary power: "Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience)" (1977 138/139). In both cases the political problem is not simply one of exploitation or domination, but of the necessary provocation of a "counter-power".

This problem manifests itself in Marx's writing as the tension between "abstract labor" and "living labor." Of the two of these concepts only the first is directly given in Marx, the second persists as a fugitive thread (like the problem of subjectivity itself) throughout Marx's writing. At the outset "abstract labor" refers to the abstraction necessary to quantify the activity of diverse bodies. In order for commodities to be exchanged, labor must be organized so that it is indifferent to who performs it. Underlying the concept of abstract labor are practices such as surveillance and the division and simplification of tasks, all of which make this indifference a material reality. The concept of "abstract labor" is inseparable from a political and economic strategy—the reduction of all labor to simple abstract labor, and the destruction of skills. Abstract labor is a reduction of the worker, of subjectivity, to the minimum required for the reproduction of the capitalist system. This strategy, sometimes called "proletarianization," which Marx at times identified as the dominant tendency if not the destiny of capitalism, runs up against certain limits, not the least of which is "living labor" as the internal limit of abstract labor. Living labor is the inverse of abstract labor, it can be described by the same attributes – indifference to the content of activity, flexibility, even poverty – but these qualities now appear as sources of its strength.

This living labor, existing as an abstraction from these moments of its actual reality [raw-material, instrument of labor etc.] also, not value; this complete denudation, purely subjective existence of labor, stripped of all objectivity. Labor as absolute poverty; poverty not as shortage, but as total exclusion of objective



wealth...Labor not as an object, but as activity; not as itself value, but as the living source of value.... Thus, it is not at all contradictory, or, rather, the in-every-way mutually contradictory statements that labor is absolute poverty as object, on one side, and is, on the other side, the general possibility [allgemeine Möglichkeit] of wealth as subject and as activity, are reciprocally determined and follow from the essence of labor, such as it is presupposed by capital as its contradiction and as its contradictory being [gegensätzliches Dasein], and such as it, in turn, presupposes capital (Marx 1973 296/217).

Living labor, however, is not just the abstract and static inversion to abstract labor, it appears throughout Marx's writings at every point that capital necessarily develops and relies on the subjective capacities of labor, its ability to not only produce wealth, but to communicate and constitute new social relations. Living labor is the fact that labor power cannot be simply reduced to a functional element of the system.

The capitalist mode of production emerges when a flow of "free" labor meets a flow of "free" wealth. It is clear now that this freedom on the side of labor is the simultaneity of poverty and indeterminacy. It would not be improper to think of this indeterminacy, this abstraction, as a kind of power, the power to bring the new into the world; after all it produces not only things, commodities, but the capitalist mode of production itself. It would also be correct to identify this abstract subjective potential as something new, and thus as something which emerges with, and is the condition for, capitalist accumulation. It would be incorrect, however, to identify this with freedom in the conventional sense, since this abstract-subjective-potential cannot but sell itself as labor power. It must subject itself to whatever-capitalist enterprise, to the job and task available. Abstract labor is free to develop and consume "whatever" forces and possibilities, forces and possibilities unimaginable and impossible within the relatively narrow spheres of pre-capitalist reproduction. At the same time, it is also freely exposed to the demands and transformations of the labor market. The old guarantees that limited production, tying it to a determinate sphere of reproduction, political and social, have disappeared. In the absence of old guarantees and prior limitations, there is a new struggle, a new antagonism: it is a struggle that seeks to reduce "living labor", the flexibility and productivity of a new subject, to "abstract labor", to interchangeability, homogeneity, and an increasingly precarious position.

Returning to the current conditions of late capitalism, we recognize the simultaneity of these two processes in a world in which, on the one hand, the cooperative, intellectual, and affective capacities of labor are continually developed and presupposed, while, on the other, this flexibility is continually exposed to the precariousness of temp-work and part time labor. Viewed in light of Marx's writings on primitive accumulation and "Pre-capitalist Economic Formations," we can see how capital redeploys old strategies and practices to contain the explosive force of this contradiction—capitalism truly is "a motley painting of everything that has ever been believed" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983 34/42). We are confronted with a neo-primitive accumulation, an accumulation not simply of wealth and workers but of subjective potentials, desires, and knowledges many of which were formed outside of capitalism, in the public sector and in the interstices of commodified existence (Hardt and Negri 258). We can see a resurgence of ancient mystifications as the work of an increasingly cooperative and socialized power of living labor is presented as the completely magical power of capitalism to create wealth.<sup>210</sup> A reading of these texts, of the fugitive thread of the production of subjectivity in Marx, also exposes the conditions for reversing these trends: it reveals that the stakes of opposing capital are not simply economic or political, but involve the production of subjectivity. In order to oppose capital it will be necessary to engage in a counter production of subjectivity. The tools for this counter-production are already in our hands, in the affective and communicative networks that are created and maintained in our day to day labors.

## Works Cited

Albiac, Gabriel. "Spinoza/Marx: le sujet construit." In *Architectures de la raison: Mélanges offerts à Alexandre Matheron*. Saint Cloud: ENS Editions Fontenay, 1996.

---

<sup>210</sup>Marx recognized that the development of an increasingly social labor force entailed the intensification of a mystification of capital. "This entire development of the productive forces of *socialized labor* (in contrast to the more or less isolated labor of individuals), and together with it the *uses of science* (the general product of social development), *in the immediate process of production*, takes the form [stellt sich dar] of the productive power of capital. It does not appear as the productive power of labor, or even of that part of it that is identical with capital. And least of all does it appear as the productive power either of the individual workers or of the workers joined together in the process of production" (1977 1024).

- Althusser, Louis. "The Crisis of Marxism." Translated by Graham Locke. In *Power and Opposition in Post Revolutionary Societies*. London: Ink Links, 1979.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Le courant souterrain du matérialisme de la rencontre." In *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, vol. 1. Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Marx dans ses limites." In *Écrits philosophiques et politiques*, vol. 1. Paris: Stock/IMEC, 1994.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sur la reproduction*. Paris: PUF, 1995.
- Althusser, Louis and Etienne Balibar. *Reading Capital*. London: New Left. 1970 Originally published Louis Althusser et al *Lire le Capital* Paris: Editions Découverte, 1965.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by Robert Hurley et al. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983. Originally published as *l'Anti-Œdipe: Capitalisme et Schizophrénie*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1972.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. . Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987. Originally published as *Mille Plateaux*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1980.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage, 1970.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1977. Originally published as *Surveiller et Punir: Naissance de la prison*. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1975.
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge: Harvard, 2000.
- Lazzarato, Maurizio. "Le cycle de la production immatérielle," in *Futur Antérieur* 35-36, 1992.
- Marx, Karl. *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by S.W. Ryasanskaya New York: International, 1970. Published as *Zur Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1958.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus. New York: Penguin, 1973. Published as *Karl Marx Friedrich Engels Werke Band 42* Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. New York: Penguin, 1977. Published as *Karl Marx Friedrich Engels Werke Band 23* Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1988.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Results of the Immediate Process of Production." in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. New York: Penguin, 1977. Published as *Karl Marx Friedrich Engels Gesamtausgabe Band 2*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1988.

Negri, Antonio. "Twenty Thesis on Marx: Interpretation of the Class Situation Today." Translated by Michael Hardt, in *Marxism Beyond Marxism* Edited by S. Makdisi et al New York: Routledge, 1996.

Tronti, Mario. *Ouvriers et Capital*. Translated by Yann Moulier-Boutang Paris: Cibles, 1977.

**Visit the *Pli* Website:**

**[www.warwick.ac.uk/philosophy/pli\\_journal/](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/philosophy/pli_journal/)**

The recently upgraded the *Pli* website now offers:

- Full contents listings from Volume 6 onwards.
- A complete index to volumes 6-10, also downloadable as a PDF file.
- Free downloadable PDF files for all contributions to past issues now out of print (where possible). Currently available volumes will be added as free PDF files when printed stocks become exhausted.
- Full details regarding how to buy *Pli*, including links to our new international distributor frontlist.com from whom customers (especially in North America) can buy *Pli* on-line using a secure server.